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ABSTRACT

In order to measure the effects of exposure to filmed violence, 40 third-grade boys and girls were shown two television excerpts. One-half of the group viewed a segment from a violent detective series; the other half saw an exciting but nonviolent segment from a major league baseball game. Immediately afterward, each child was asked to "babysit" two preschoolers. The preschoolers eventually behaved aggressively and destructively. Children who previously witnessed the aggressive segment were significantly slower to summon adult assistance than were children who viewed the control film. These results replicate those of a similar study done by Drabman and Thomas, supporting the hypothesis that exposure to televised violence may serve to make viewers, particularly children, tolerant of real-life aggression and less likely to intervene. (Author/CS)

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Exposure to Filmed Violence and Children's Tolerance of Real Life Aggression

Ronald S. Drabman and Margaret Hanratty Thomas

The authors of numerous studies (e.g., Bandura, Ross and Ross, 1961, 1963; Bandura, 1965; Hanratty, Liebert, Morris and Fernandez, 1969; Hanratty, O'Neal and Sulzer, 1972) are in agreement that young children may mimic aggressive actions after exposure to filmed violence. Indeed, much concern has been voiced regarding the continuing use of aggressive themes in television programs in view of the potential modeling and disinhibiting effects of such displays. In addition to these undesirable effects, Drabman & Thomas (in press) have shown that exposure to filmed violence also may serve to increase viewers' toleration of real life aggression. They reported that children who had previously viewed a Hopalong Cassidy movie (which featured shootings and fistfights) were significantly slower to take responsible action to end a fight between two younger children than were subjects who had not seen the film.

The purpose of the present experiment was to attempt to replicate the results of Drabman & Thomas (in press) while(1) using a more contemporary aggressive film (a videotape from a currently broadcast detective series) and(2) attempting to control for differential arousal effects by exposing children in the control group to an exciting but nonviolent film. One half of the boys and girls in the present study watched an excerpt from a violent television program while the remaining subjects saw an excerpt from a televised major league baseball game. Immediately thereafter, each child was asked to "babysit" with two younger children. Initially the younger children played quietly but eventually behaved more and more aggressively and destructively. It was predicted that children who had seen the aggressive film would be slower to notify the experimenter of the preschoolers' altercation than the children in the control group. In accord with the results of Drabman & Thomas (in press), no sex differences were anticipated.

METHOD

Subjects and Experimenters. The subjects were 20 boys and 20 girls from the third grade of a parochial grade school serving a predominantly white lower-middle class area of Orlando. The same 22-year-old white male was the experimenter for all subjects.

Procedure. After meeting each subject individually at his classroom, the experimenter explained that they were to go to a nearby room in the school building to "play some games". However, before doing so, the experimenter remarked: "We're ahead of schedule so before we play the games, I'll let you take a look at my new trailer." He then took the subject to a trailer located on the school grounds. Upon arrival, the experimenter explained that the trailer was being used by a friend of his who sometimes worked with younger children there. The large room inside the trailer contained a variety of toys suitable for preschoolers (i.e., toy milk bottles, a toy telephone, blocks, paper and crayons). At the end of the room was a large camera mounted on a trinod. The experimenter pointed to the camera and remarked: "We have a T.V. camera here. It takes pictures of everything going on in this room. In fact, it's taking pictures of us right now!" Next, the experimenter escorted the child to the room in the school building and said, "Let's see what's on T.V." One half of the subjects were shown a 15-minute video-taped excerpt from a nationally broadcast detective series which contained many violent acts. The remaining children viewed a video-taped segment from a televised major league baseball game of comparable length. After viewing the film, the experimenter told the subject that he had to leave the room for a short period of time. He explained further: "I have somewhat of a problem. You see, I promised my friend who will be working with younger children in the trailer today that I would watch the children for him while he's gone. See, I can turn on this T.V. set and watch what's happening in the trailer. The experimenter then turned on the monitor which showed the still vacant trailer. Oh good! They haven't gotten there yet. There's no one there now. Well, I might get back before they arrive, but if I don't, could you watch the children for me? Thanks a lot. Just watch the T.V. and if the children get there before I come back, then you keep an eye on them. I imagine they'll be O.K. but sometimes little kids can get into trouble, and that's why an older person should be watching them (Drabman & Thomas, in press)".

Before leaving, the experimenter told the subject exactly where he would be (e.g., in a nearby location in the building), and emphasized that the subject should notify him

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if the preschoolers got into any "trouble".

Each child then witnessed the same video-taped sequence (Drabman & Thomas, in press). After an initial segment which showed the unoccupied trailer, an adult and two young children (a four-year-old girl and five-year-old boy) entered the trailer. After the adult left, the children played quietly for the first minute. However, they soon began to make derogatory comments to each other and then maliciously destroyed one another's block buildings. Their altercation became progressively more serious and culminated in a physical fight during which the camera appeared to be knocked over and broken. At this point the video portion went blank while the audio briefly continued as the children cast accusations of blame. Finally, the audio ended with another ominous crash.

The experimenter waited outside the room and recorded the time which elapsed before the subject came to get him. If the subject had not responded within two minutes after the audio portion, the experimenter re-entered the room.

RESULTS

Sincere there was heterogeneity of variance among the groups, the 2 (aggressive film, control film) X 2 (male, female) analysis of variance was performed on the square-roots of the subjects' latency scores (Winer, 1962). Only the main effect for treatment conditions is significant ($F = 5.99$; $df = 1,36$; $p < .05$; all other F's < 1). Thus, as predicted, subjects who had previously witnessed the aggressive film were significantly slower to notify the experimenter of the preschoolers' altercation than were subjects who viewed the control film (X's = 20.62 and 19.25, respectively). Also, as anticipated, sex of subject was not related to latency of responding. Of further interest, seven children in the aggressive film group failed to respond at all while only one child in the control group failed to respond. This difference also was significant ($\chi^2 = 5.62$, $df = 1$, $p < .025$). Similarly, failure to respond was not a function of sex of subject ($\chi^2 = 0.62$, $df = 1$, $p < .50$).

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study are in accord with those reported by Drabman & Thomas (in press). Exposure to televised violence reliably decreased subjects' readiness to summon appropriate adult help while witnessing an altercation between two younger children. Additionally, children's decisions of whether or not to intervene at all were also influenced by this variable.

These results, together with those from studies demonstrating the modeling and disinhibitory effects of observing violence (e.g., Bandura, Ross and Ross, 1961, 1963; Bandura, 1965; Hanratty, Liebert, Morris and Fernandez, 1969; Hanratty, O'Neal and Sulzer, 1972), suggest that violent television programs may not only increase viewers' aggressive behavior but may teach them to tolerate it in others.

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FOOTNOTE

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